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AUTHOR Mitchell, Charles; Maar, Joyce
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ABSTRACT

A total of 100 teachers from a large metropolitan school district, a small city school system, and a rural school system in Tennessee responded to a survey about elementary school level career patterns. Survey questions focused on teacher background, attitudes and expectations about teaching, and future career plans in teaching. Results indicated that about 44 percent of teachers who had wished to teach in kindergarten through third grade started at a level that was at least two grades higher; teachers who wished to teach grades 4-6 often taught at the lower levels. It appeared that teachers were frequently asked or ordered to change to a different grade level, even when they did not feel qualified for the assignment. Although all teachers were certified to teach the kindergarten through eighth grades, 56 percent felt that they were best qualified for kindergarten through third grade, 13 percent felt that they were best qualified for fourth through sixth grade, and 23 percent felt that they were qualified for kindergarten through eighth grade. When asked to identify levels that their college program had not prepared them to teach, 13 percent named kindergarten, 10 percent named first through third grade, and 33 percent named fourth through sixth grades. About 25 percent of respondents indicated that they expected more career satisfaction in another field. (CB)

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Elementary School Certification Practices: Is it Time for a Change?

*Charles Mitchell

Department of Mathematics and Computer Science

Joyce Maar

Department of Home Economics

Middle Tennessee State University

Running head: Elementary School Certification Practices

*Currently at Western Carolina University
Department of Mathematics

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Abstract

It was the purpose of this investigation to focus, in part, on current certification practices, and on the career patterns of in-service elementary school teachers in the State of Tennessee. An elementary school level career patterns survey was constructed and sent to 150 in-service teachers of grades kindergarten through sixth. A total of 50 surveys each were sent to a large metropolitan school, a small city school, and a rural county school system in the Middle Tennessee area. Approximately 67 percent of the teachers from each of the three school systems responded to the survey. Results supported concerns that using kindergarten through eighth grade certification practices instead of more limited certification such as grades kindergarten through third or grades fourth through eighth placed too great a demand on the college programs. As a result many teachers questioned whether they were adequately prepared for teaching all grade levels for which they were certified. In addition, teachers responded to a variety of questions regarding their careers in education and possible future change.

Elementary School Certification Practices:

Is it Time for a Change?

Demands placed upon today's elementary school teachers are tremendous. One must not only be sophisticated in many different academic disciplines, but be an expert in child psychology as well. Many states have helped lessen the demands placed upon our teachers by creating different certification levels within the elementary school, such as individual certification for grades kindergarten through third, grades fourth through sixth, and sixth through eighth. Some states, however, such as Tennessee and Ohio continue only to offer broad certification levels such as kindergarten through eighth grade.

Some recent statistics have suggested that one half of the teachers who begin teaching now will leave education before five years have passed. If so, this bleak picture suggests that either academically or psychologically our elementary education graduates are not being prepared for their chosen profession. To compound the problem, those of us who advise these students know that many of the students badly underestimate the

standards they will need to attain in order to be effective teachers. It is questionable whether the typical program which would certify a person to teach kindergarten through eighth grade would adequately prepare the person for both kindergarten and eighth grade mathematics or science. The differences in the children across these grade levels and the requirements of the curriculum are imposing indeed. Is it possible that broad licensing procedures, such as those found in Tennessee are no longer realistic and place too great a demand on the typical four-year college pre-service education program? As advisors and instructors, we have heard students with a history of low academic achievement promise only to teach the lower grade levels in order to obtain a positive recommendation. Nevertheless, how many students who wish to begin their careers in the lower grade levels actually accept a position in an upper grade level? The current shortage of middle school and junior high school mathematics and science teachers is forcing some systems to hire individuals who are certified through grade eight, but in reality do not have the same depth of knowledge as someone who graduated from a middle school certification program.

It was the purpose of this investigation to focus on the current certification practices in Tennessee that allow one to teach either grades kindergarten through eighth or grades first through eighth. In-service teachers were asked to respond to a variety of questions regarding their careers in education and the adequacy of their training to meet the demands of their broad certification.

Method

An elementary school level career patterns survey was constructed and sent to 150 in-service teachers of grades kindergarten through sixth. A total of 50 surveys each were sent to a large metropolitan school district, a small city school system, and a rural county school system in the Middle Tennessee area. Each system had agreed to participate in the survey and had agreed to ask their teachers to cooperate with a research team from a regional state university.

The initial questions on the survey were background questions. These questions focused upon the teacher's level of education, future degree plans, sex, and years of experience.

After the initial questions, teachers were asked to identify the grade level taught for each year of their experience. They were then asked to identify the grade level or levels they had wished to teach when they had first graduated from college, whether they had ever been asked or required to shift grade levels after their initial assignment had been made, which grade levels they felt most qualified to teach, and which grade levels they felt least qualified to teach.

The final questions focused on the teacher's future plans and whether the teacher was planning to leave the classroom but stay in education or to leave the profession altogether. They were then asked whether they favored some kind of merit pay plan and whether they favored longer school days or an eleven month school year. The last question asked was how they would have improved their college program.

Results

Approximately 67 percent of the teachers from each of the three school systems responded to the survey (a total of 100 respondents). A summary of the background questions is contained in Table 1. Most teachers have

taken some courses beyond their bachelors degree. Almost all of the teachers were female. The average length of time in teaching was 13 yesrs.

Insert Table 1 about here

Based upon the results of the survey, it is important that a teacher be qualified to teach all grades for which he/she is certified. Results indicate that approximately 44 percent of the teachers who had wished to begin teaching grades kindergarten through third actually started at a level which was at least two grades higher than the level initially desired. In addition, 25 percent of the teachers who wanted to teach in grades fourth through sixth accepted positions at least two grade levels lower than those initially desired.

The teachers were asked if they had ever been asked or order to shift to a different grade level after an initial assignment had been made. In all, 37 percent of the teachers stated that they had been 'asked' to change their assignment to a different grade level, and 13 percent reported that they had been 'ordered' to

shift. Although some elementary education majors vow never to accept a position for which they felt unqualified, it is undoubtedly true that individuals asked or ordered to teach another grade level, particularly new teachers, might feel tremendous pressure to cooperate with the administration.

The importance of preparing teachers to teach all grade levels for which they will be certified was further reflected in additional responses to questions. For instance, 56 percent of the teachers stated that they were best qualified to teach grades kindergarten through third, 13 percent stated that they were best qualified to teach grades fourth through sixth, and only 23 percent stated that they were best qualified to teach grades kindergarten through eighth. However, all respondents were certified to teach grades kindergarten through eighth or grades first through eighth. When asked to identify grade levels that their college program had not prepared them to teach, 13 percent named kindergarten, 10 percent named levels first through third, and 33 percent named a grade from fourth through sixth.

That the teaching profession places tremendous demands upon its teachers was reflected in the number of teachers who openly stated plans to leave the classroom. Of the teachers responding, 13 percent indicated that they wished to leave the classroom for another area of education, and 12 percent announced plans to leave education in the near future (excluding retirement). Thus 25 percent of the teachers indicated that they expected more career satisfaction in another area.

The teachers were also asked to respond to some general questions of topical interest. When asked if they favored some kind of merit pay plan, 38 percent indicated a desire for merit pay considerations. Many educators are proposing changes either in the length of the school day, or in the length of the school year, but only 14 percent of the teachers favored an 11 month school year, and only 12 percent favored longer school days.

Personal Responses

Personal responses relating to what one perceived to be major deficiencies in their college programs, were made by 53 percent of the respondents. Sixty-none per-

cent of those responding said their degrees were lacking in actual classroom experiences. "I really do not feel college courses prepared me for a classroom of 26 pupils. I'm not sure any courses could without more actual time in the classroom as a college course." They thought that classroom experiences should start before the senior year and should be more realistic to actual life teaching positions. They also expressed a need to have the student teaching experience be longer than one semester. "My college education did not include enough first hand experience to adequately prepare me for the many, many jobs a teacher must do. I think practice teaching should be a year instead of eight weeks."

In addition, 21 percent responded that their programs were deficient in actual basic information. They wanted less methodology and theory and more courses that offered basic information. "College courses should be more realistic and prepare teachers to handle everyday life situations." Fourteen percent felt that they did not receive enough information on classroom management and discipline techniques in order

to be able to adequately maintain control of the classroom setting. And finally, 12 percent expressed a need for more courses in the area of teaching reading.

Conclusion

Results from this study suggest that our college programs are not adequately meeting the needs of our elementary teachers. Perhaps examination must be given to the broad certification that our elementary teachers receive today in some states. It may be less stressful for teachers later in their careers if certification was for a more limited area of teaching such as grades kindergarten through third or grades fourth through sixth.

The shortage of certified teachers to teach Science and Mathematics in the middle grades has been well documented. In states such as Tennessee and Ohio schools are able to hire individuals certified for these grade levels in theory, but in reality, perhaps, inadequately prepared to meet the demands of the middle school level. States which offer middle school subject certificates typically require 18 to 21 semester hours in a subject concentration, if not a minor in the

subject area. When compared to the two courses in mathematics and science that a kindergarten through eighth grade program requires, the disparity is too much not to cause great concern.

The practicality of what one learns in the college classroom must also be examined to see whether it is really applicable for those who will be teaching in the "real world." More information dealing with parents, administration, and children's psychological needs might be more pertinent to issues encountered as a teacher.

Children today contend with many psychological experiences that can affect their learning and behavior. When one out of every two marriages ends in divorce (current Consumer and Lifestudies, 1985), when each year over 2,000,000 women and children are abused (Straus and Gelles, 1986) and over 1,000,000 children run away from home (Chelimisky, 1982), when children are torn between loyalties and conflicts because of living in step families, when 29 percent of all children in the United States are born to teenage parents (Times, 1985), we can definitely say that our young children are faced

with extreme conditions that have a great effect on their psychological well-being and ability to concentrate. It is difficult for children to learn when they are overwhelmed with personal problems. If a teacher wishes his/her students to be responsive and to learn, he/she must first be able to deal with their psychological needs; an area in which most teachers have had little or no training.

In addition, more actual classroom experience early in the college programs could possibly help some individuals to decide that elementary education is not the career for them. This could impact the quality of the teachers that would be influencing and teaching our children. In conclusion, the high rate of teacher burnout and those teachers choosing to make a career change in midlife, necessitate the re-evaluation of our college educational programs and their adequacy in actually meeting the needs of today's teachers and their students.

Chelimisky, E. (1982, May). A statement on the runaway and homeless youth program, presented before the subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Education and Labor, United States House of Representatives.

Children having children: Teen pregnancy in America. (1985, Dec. 9). Time, 78-90.

Families in focus. (1985, March). Current Consumer and Lifestudies: The Practical Guide to Real Life Issues, 9 (7), 3-10.

Straus, M. A., & Gelles, R. J. (1986). Societal change and change in family violence from 1975 to 1985 as revealed by two national surveys. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 48 (3), 465-480.

Table 1

Teacher's Background Information

Level of Education

	BA/BS	BA/BS+[a]	MA/MEd	MA/MEd+[a]	SPEC	PhD/EdD	Total
Urban	4	16	14	5	1	1	41
Suburban	12	11	5	2	2	1	33
Rural	8	10	3	2	3	0	26

Plans to Continue Education

	BA/BS	MA/MEd	Total
Urban	7	8	15
Suburban	5	4	9
Rural	11	1	12

Sex

	Male	Female	Total
Urban	4	37	41
Suburban	1	32	33
Rural	2	24	26

Average Years Experience

Urban	12.34 years
Suburban	13.21 years
Rural	12.73 years

BA/BS+ (or Ma/MEd+[a]: Indicates some credit hours beyond the degree indicated.